



**New York City Mayor's Charter Revision Commission
Testimony of Brooklyn Borough President Eric L. Adams
July 25, 2018**

Good evening members of Mayor Bill de Blasio's Charter Revision Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on issues of importance to be considered before the Commission and, in particular, the Preliminary Staff Report of the Commission.

Campaign Finance:

I applaud the Commission's willingness to thoughtfully address the shortcomings of our current campaign finance system. However, as I stated during my previous testimony, the majority of the reform proposals inadequately address the real issue in our electoral system: money. A system that is based on constituent donations, even one that favors local donors, will still leave the majority of constituents unable to contribute money. Lowering the contribution amounts allowed, increasing the amount that will be matched, and increasing the number of times the donation is matched all avoid the reality that most people cannot afford to donate money to a campaign. Because of this, potential candidates are disincentivized from connecting with those constituents, much less addressing their concerns.

I reiterate my call for a system of 100 percent public financing for all City campaigns. The importance of an individual's support for a candidate should not be based on their ability to donate money to the candidate. Their voices must be afforded the same opportunity to affect change in our city. In addition to not having their voices drowned out by deep pocketed donors, a system that is based on donor contributions favors people who are adept at raising money, not necessarily those with the best idea. Too often, local community activists self-select out of running for office based on their inability to raise funds.

Better systems exist that allow a candidate to spend their time and energy engaging the entire electorate, not making calls to large donors while simultaneously avoiding any appearance of corruption when it comes to raising campaign funding. Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine have systems that provide 100 percent funding for candidates who opt to use the system. Surely, we would need to ensure that candidates have a minimum level of support to qualify for the system in order to protect the financial stability of the program, but again, there are models we can learn from. We also would need to ensure that the amount distributed to candidates is sufficient to run a legitimate campaign, even if their opponent does not opt to take part in public financing.

Instant Runoff Voting (IRV):

I am happy to see that the Commission is reviewing the possibility of implementing Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) in New York City. IRV enhances the voice of the people while saving taxpayers' money. It encourages civility in candidates and ultimately arrives at a candidate that has the most widespread support in the community. There is no reasonable argument for continuing to rely on runoff elections when a proven system of avoiding the costs of a runoff while simultaneously benefitting our system of democracy exists. I urge the Commission to recommend the adoption of IRV in New York City.

Community Board Reform:

Community Boards are the center of our democratic system. They are a place where the community can directly affect the policy makers. But far too often, the members remain members for long periods, blocking new voices and limiting the diversity of voices on the board. While institutional knowledge is valuable, a reasonable term limit for Community Board members will allow the best of both worlds: institutional knowledge and new voices. I encourage the Commission to explore a five-term limit for each member (10 years). Those members must take a two-term break before applying for membership again. They would be, as now, welcome to stay involved with the Community Board through committee membership. The 10-year limit allows for a mix of experienced members and new faces, which will be a better representation of the community. Some manner of grandfathering in current members so they do not have to leave immediately should also be explored.

Office of Civic Engagement:

I am interested in the proposal to institute an Office of Civic Engagement, but it must have well-defined roles and be funded in a manner that allows it to truly impact the entire city. A half-hearted effort will yield half-hearted results.

First, there should be a liaison for each borough, ensuring a voice for each borough, and equity in the distribution of resources. Civic engagement must extend to everyone and the structure of the entity should reflect that goal.

Second, part of its mandate should be recruiting for Community Boards, Neighborhood Advisory Boards, Community Education Councils, and other government-linked groups in which communities come together to affect change. This proposal goes hand in hand with the proposed term limits for Community Board members.

Finally, this entity should continue the good progress that has been made in improving outreach in multiple languages. We should continue to explore the potential for translation of materials in even more languages as the demographic make-up of the city is continuously changing.

Redistricting:

One of the more interesting proposals relating to redistricting is reducing the allowable population deviation between districts. New York City should move in the direction of a lower allowable deviation to better fulfill the “one person, one vote” requirement under the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution. The current 10 percent margin is too high. I encourage the Commission to work toward a five percent allowable margin in population diversity.